

1-1-1961

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Recommended Citation

Swisher, Jacob A. "Early Iowa Mills." *The Palimpsest* 42 (1961), 5-11.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol42/iss1/3>

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Early Iowa Mills

When the early pioneers first felt the enchantment of the Iowa prairie, they were coming into an area that would one day be "A Land of Many Mills." Indeed, almost every type of mill that has been devised in any land in all the ages has at some time been used in Iowa. There were hand mills of various types and many designs, including the primitive kinds that did not turn. Chief among pioneer instruments for grinding, however, were rotating mills. There were horse-power mills, ox mills, and treadmills. There were windmills, powerful and mighty, though not used extensively for the grinding of grain. There were water mills in abundance, and steam and electric power mills not a few. There were sawmills, woolen mills, flour mills, gristmills and paper mills — mills a thousand strong. Iowa was, indeed, a land of mills.

The first water mill in Iowa was erected before the land was open to white settlers. When logs were needed to build Fort Crawford near Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, Federal troops were directed to cross the Mississippi River and erect a sawmill on the Yellow River in what is now Iowa. There a dam was built, a sawmill constructed, and

Jefferson Davis, then a lieutenant in the United States Army, superintended the work during the summer of 1831. According to tradition, Davis was kind to the Indians in this vicinity and as a result he was adopted into their tribe and given the name of "Little Chief." Thus it was that the first water-power mill in Iowa came to be known as the "Jeff Davis Mill." A few years after its erection it is reported to have burned "like a ship at the water's edge." Many years later investigators rediscovered the location of the old mill and recorded the site of the first milldam in the Iowa country.

The region west of the Mississippi River was opened to white settlers on June 1, 1833. Although the early pioneers needed mills for the sawing of logs and for the grinding of grist immediately upon their arrival, no laws were passed for the building of milldams prior to 1838. Meanwhile, most of the logs were hewn with axes, and most of the grinding of grain was done with hand mills — coffee mills or homemade crushers and grinders, sometimes even "jointers" or "graters." Some pioneers, however, did erect mills and milldams without legislative action.

The water-power milling industry in Dubuque County seems to have begun with the erection of a log mill near the mouth of Catfish Creek in 1834. A year later this was replaced by a small frame building which had "a single run of small

French buhrs." At the site of this little mill the famous Rockdale mills were established in the decade of the forties. In 1834 Benjamin W. Clark, one of the first settlers in Scott County, built a sawmill on Duck Creek, fifteen miles up the Mississippi River from his home in Buffalo. In 1835 a gristmill was built on Crow Creek near Le Claire. This building was sixteen by eighteen feet in dimensions and was constructed of hewn logs. It contained a single set of millstones "cut from prairie boulders."

The village of Augusta on the Skunk River in Des Moines County was settled soon after this area was opened for settlement. There in May, 1835, Levi Moffatt, William Smith, Robert Chestnut, and Fred Kessler began the construction of a dam and sawmill, which was soon operating. In one corner of the mill "a one-stone run" of burrs was placed to grind corn and wheat. The "Moffatt Mill" as it was called, served the pioneers of a wide area and came to be a renowned Iowa landmark. The original building was destroyed by the flood of 1851, but it was rebuilt and operated successfully until 1876.

When water power mills were not available for the grinding of grain, Iowa pioneers resorted to other means of generating power. A typical frontier mill of the burrstone type operated by man power was designed and constructed by Aaron Porter. The pioneers of 1837 in Cedar County,

who had grain but no means of grinding it, prevailed upon Porter to build something that would serve as a mill. Going to the prairie he selected two boulders for the upper and nether millstones. The grinding surface of these stones, about ten inches in diameter, were "dressed down" to suit the purpose for which they were to be applied. One of the stones was fastened to the floor of his cabin. A hole, or eye, was drilled through the center of the other one, which was so adjusted as to revolve from the pivotal center. An upright shaft completed the machinery. One end of the shaft was fixed in the upper side of the upper millstone, and the other end was fitted "gudgeon fashion," in a joist above.

The power was derived from the shaft which was operated by two men, one using his right hand and the other his left. With their other hands they fed the mill. It was a rude, primitive contrivance, but it served its purpose, and its construction was regarded by the people, whom it was intended to accommodate, as "a great and convenient accomplishment," hence it came to be widely known as the "Little Savior." Many bushels of grain were carried to it by the pioneers on foot, or horseback, or in rudely constructed ox carts or sleds. Usually two of the settlers would go to the mill together and help each other with the grinding. No toll was exacted — no charge made for the use of the mill. It was built for the

accommodation of the settlers, and was a convenience that was greatly appreciated by the pioneers.

Mills operated by horse power were available in some areas. Lucius H. Langworthy of Dubuque, writing in the decade of the sixties about very early conditions in that region, noted that as more settlers came, horse-power mills were erected throughout the county. "They consisted merely of an enclosure of logs with a great wheel in the center, around which a large leather rope called a whang was placed and was also attached to a smaller wheel, the gudgeon of which turned the mill stones and ground the corn, the motive power being horses. Customers took their own teams and wagons with shelled corn and went often to the horse mill ten, twenty, and even thirty miles distant — waiting sometimes one, two, or three days for their turn to grind, living in the meanwhile on parched corn and sleeping out in their wagons or around a heap of burning logs."

An early pioneer, commenting upon his westward trip across Iowa, said: "In the middle of the day a stop was made for dinner at a farm house by the roadside, and attention attracted to a number of farm teams gathered around a frame work in the adjoining barnyard. This frame work turned out to be an old-fashioned tanbark mill, with a horsepower sweep attached. . . . The neighboring settlers had gathered in, each with

his little sack of shelled corn, and taking turns hitched their teams to the sweep and ground out their different grists. The travelers had their dinner from bread made of this meal, with fried bacon and eggs, and enjoyed it as heartily as they would now one served in the best hotel in Iowa."

Unique in the annals of Iowa was the treadmill used for the grinding of grist. Sometimes the motive power was furnished by oxen or cattle. Windmills were not commonly used in Iowa for the grinding of grain—but there was some experimentation in this area. Upon the promise of a bonus of a thousand dollars a resident of Adair County built a windmill for grinding. The power was to have been "supplied by four huge wings," after the style of the mills of Holland. But the wind was "too uncertain and too erratic" for successful operation.

An early pioneer — Egbert T. Smith, a resident of the Wapsipinicon valley, attempted to harness "an Iowa zephyr" and utilize its power. But he proved himself to be a veritable "tenderfoot." The wind would not obey his will, but worked in its own wild way. "It laughed at Smith's temerity; it roared at his audacity; it whispered its displeasure; it shrieked at his interference; it howled, it sulked, it bucked, it balked; it shook his machine in its frenzy; it would not be tamed and work his saw." It is reported that in the end Smith saw the folly of his plan and ac-

knowledgeed defeat "in language more forceful than elegant."

In 1875 the Dutch settlers in Sioux County subscribed \$800 for a genuine Dutch windmill. It operated successfully for a time and was one of the features of the landscape which told the world of the colony's nationality. But it was soon dismantled and supplanted by a modern steam roller-mill. It was later suggested that the structure "deserved a better fate," and should have been preserved as a pioneer landmark.

Steam power has played an important role in the milling industry. Gasoline engines and electric motors, too, have turned many millstones. But in Iowa the history of milling, prior to the era of big business, centered around the many water mills along Iowa streams, and there remains today an affectionate interest in the Old Water Mill.

Listen to the water-mill:

Through the livelong day.
How the clicking of its wheel
Wears the hours away!
Languidly the autumn wind
Stirs the forest leaves,
From the field the reapers sing,
Binding up their sheaves;
And a proverb haunts my mind
As a spell is cast —
'The mill cannot grind
With the water that is past.'